

NSW Ministry Health

Evaluation Intervention Innovation Fund

Summary of key findings and implications for policy and practice

Project title: An evaluation of the Odyssey House NSW residential rehabilitation program

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Background and Rationale – what problem were you solving?

Odyssey House NSW (OH NSW) is a not-for-profit organisation that provides residential and community services for individuals experiencing problematic alcohol and other drug (AoD) use. The residential rehabilitation program has been in operation for more than 40 years and services clients aged 18 years or older needing support with co-occurring mental health issues.

Background

Access to treatment for problematic AoD use is a public health issue in Australia and worldwide. Ensuring adequate access to appropriate treatment is one way in which the outcomes of individuals in need of AoD treatment can be improved, especially those requiring early intervention. The therapeutic community (TC) model of treatment is an approach that has been utilised for AoD treatment by a range of services both in Australia and worldwide.

The OH NSW residential rehabilitation program follows the TC approach by facilitating the personal growth of clients in order to address the complex relational, psychological and legal issues that often accompany problematic AoD use. The range of services delivered within the OH NSW program are diverse, and include personalised support for mental and physical health issues, a withdrawal management unit, specialised therapy groups (e.g., gambling, domestic violence), a Parent's and Children's Program, and the Progressive Learning Centre, a registered on-site school that provides remedial numeracy and literacy education.

Rationale

Despite the long history of the TC approach to AoD treatment, there is a dearth of systematic, independently conducted treatment evaluation studies, particularly taking into account long term post-treatment follow up. Research in this area is further complicated by the diversity of services offered within the TC treatment umbrella – making comparisons between programs problematic. Finally, client demographics also vary greatly from one program/region/country to another, making program evaluation in the AoD sector more difficult still.

Despite these challenges, there remains a need to evaluate TC-based programs for AoD treatment. Doing so requires careful consideration of the difficulties which impact the conduct of evaluation in the AoD sector, while also implementing research procedures which respect the autonomy of clients and staff. The main objective of the present Evaluation was to achieve this while performing the first long-term outcomes evaluation of the OH NSW residential program.

Summary of Key Research Findings

Please summarise findings from the research below in abstract format (maximum 300 words)

Aims

Assess the treatment outcomes of residential clients during and after residential rehabilitation at OH NSW and identify which factors contribute to a successful recovery.

Research questions

1. Does OH NSW residential rehabilitation decrease substance use and improve the mental health and physical well-being of its clients, and are these treatment gains maintained 3, 6 and 12 months following program separation?
2. Which client-related factors predict early separation from the program, and are these related to time in treatment?

3. What program-related factors do clients perceive as the most, and least, helpful to their recovery, and do these perceptions change over time?

Methods

1. Outcomes Evaluation: a non-randomised, single-arm, longitudinal study assessing treatment outcomes *after the program* (intake to program separation, then 3, 6, and 12 months post-separation).
2. The Transition Project: a non-randomised, single-arm, longitudinal study assessing treatment progress *during the program* (intake, then completion of up to four treatment stages prior to end of treatment).

Main findings

- Most clients entering treatment reported problematic use of more than one drug, and half of all clients disclose a mental health diagnosis prior to entering treatment.
- Residential clients consistently improved in their substance dependence, problematic substance use, mood, quality of life and social functioning as they progressed through the treatment stages of the OH NSW program. These treatment gains were maintained immediately after and, in most cases, up to 12 months after program completion.
- Clients in treatment less than 90 days were significantly worse off on all domains compared to those who completed the average treatment length of 167 days (approx. 5-6 months). Most treatment gains also occurred within the first 270 days (approx. 9 months).
- After completing the program, clients identified that the clinical skills and support provided by the OH NSW rehabilitation staff were especially important during their time in treatment. Clients also felt that the structure and routine of the TC were both the most challenging and the most valuable aspects of the residential program.

Implications for policy and practice

Wider implications for policy

1. Improved infrastructure for integrative AoD treatment by streamlining referral processes, linking client data across services and more proactive consultation with AoD service providers on client needs in a specific geographical location would streamline intake into long-term residential programs.
2. The integration of evidence-based practice with the lived experience of clients represents one way in which formal evaluations of a program's effectiveness can be performed in the AoD sector.

Wider implications for practice i.e. services and programs

Treatment delivery

1. Based on the current findings, refining the residential rehabilitation program to maximise treatment in the first 9 months facilitate client throughput and would be most cost effective.
2. Post-program community follow up, particularly for clients who separate early from residential rehabilitation, is critical to ensure engagement with treatment strategies and philosophy.
3. Although clients initially found the highly structured environment of residential rehabilitation challenging, this element was subsequently identified as an important aspect of the program. Clear rules, responsibilities, routine and schedule are key components of this form of treatment.

Data collection

1. Regular reviews of data collection systems and procedures may help to ensure information collected is necessary, consistent with the treatment objectives of the service, and the needs of clients.
2. Allocating time and resources to better enable the follow up of clients once they have separated from the program would further verify the effectiveness of long-term AoD services. Ensuring participants' Next of Kin consent to be contacted would also be valuable.

Please comment on the particular significance of this project to NSW including customer focus

This project has confirmed that clients who enter residential rehabilitation treatment with Odyssey House NSW and who remain in treatment for at least 5-6 months, will make significant improvements in drug use, drug dependency, mood and quality of life – and those improvements can be maintained for at least up to 12 months following the program.

Research Impact

Has this research study led to further investigations or collaborations that led to other funding applications?

YES

NO

UTS and Odyssey House were successful in an Agency for Clinical Innovation Research Grant of \$30,000 in 2020 to investigate the prevalence and severity of chronic pain disorders in clients presenting for AoD treatment.

Dissemination Activities completed and planned

Dissemination activities completed

- Research poster presented at the 2019 Health Beyond Research & Innovation Showcase (Liverpool, Australia).
Title: Are residential rehabilitation clients representative of Australians who engage in problematic Alcohol and Other Drug use?
Authors: R. Miller, C. Iancu, J. Babineau, T. Newton-John
- Workshop collaboration with Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (NADA) for OH NSW staff (Redfern, Australia). Provided 1-hour of 3-hour workshop on outcome data and evaluation research.
Title: The Ins and Outs of Evaluation Research: What is Program Evaluation and why does it matter?
Authors: R. Miller, S. Hudson (co-presenter, NADA clinical director).
- Article for Community Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Research Network (CMHDARN) Newsletter. December 2019. *Title:* The Odyssey House – University of Technology Sydney Residential Rehabilitation Evaluation Project. *Author:* T. Newton-John

Dissemination activities planned

- Papers planned for publication in peer reviewed scientific journals:
 - Article 1 – “The effectiveness of residential rehabilitation for clients with problematic alcohol and other drug use in Australia: 12 month follow up.”
 - Article 2 – “A qualitative exploration of client experiences following therapeutic community treatment for problematic AoD use.”
- Research poster presentation at NADA 2020 Enhancing Connections Conference.